

American

NEWS & VIEWS

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Businessman in Chicago Launches Solar Ovens in Uganda

Ron Mutebi's plan to sell sun-powered cookers heats up

By Phillip Kurata
Staff Writer

Washington — An immigrant from Uganda now residing in Chicago has used the first portion of a \$100,000 business competition prize he won in January to begin setting up an operation in his homeland to produce and distribute ovens that cook with the heat of the sun.

Ron Mutebi won his \$100,000 prize at the African Diaspora Marketplace competition in Washington in January. The competition, sponsored by Western Union Company and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), provided awards of \$50,000 to \$100,000 to 14 winners. All of them are Africans residing in the United States who had submitted proposals to establish or expand businesses in their home countries with local partners.

After Western Union disbursed \$60,000 of the prize money in May, Mutebi arranged to ship from Chicago the components for 365 solar ovens and tools to assemble them in July. The shipment is scheduled to arrive in Uganda in October. In November, Mutebi will travel to Uganda to oversee the completion of an assembly plant and the training of staff to produce, distribute and service the cookers, made by Sun Ovens International in Elgin, Illinois. The ovens will appear in Ugandan markets in January 2011, according to Mutebi.

Mutebi has already compiled a list of nearly 1,000 people who want to buy one of the ovens, which he said will be sold for \$170 each.

"We know the payoff is going to be there. It will be big when it happens," Mutebi said. "There is no other technology that can have such an impact on environmental degradation and global warming in a practical sense."

After acquiring solar ovens, villagers will not have to spend their meager incomes to buy firewood or charcoal, the prime sources of cooking fuel in Uganda, Mutebi said. The use of firewood and charcoal has caused widespread deforestation in Uganda.

Mutebi will arrange a second shipment of oven parts when he receives the rest of the prize money, which he expects to be in November.

The Chicago-based businessman said that as Ugandan companies start to provide locally made components over the next two years, he expects the cost of the ovens to

come down to about \$100, a 41 percent drop in price but still a substantial sum for many Ugandans, whose per capita income is \$1,200 per year.

His biggest challenge to growing the business, he said, is the high interest rates that Ugandan banks charge for consumer loans — around 24 percent. Mutebi said he is looking for ways to allow oven purchasers to buy on installment. "We can't run a business sustainably the way we want to because of the lack of support from financial institutions," he said.

Mutebi also is looking at nonmonetary methods for villagers to buy an oven.

For example, as Mutebi explains it, a Ugandan farmer may plant fruit trees on his land in exchange for an oven. The trees would be Mutebi's property. The farmer and his family would be free to consume the fruit, but Mutebi would have rights to harvest and sell the surplus. This way, he said, "the ovens not only will stop deforestation but also will promote planting of new trees. Farmers will have an economic incentive to do this."

Since winning the prize, Mutebi has spoken on frequent occasions about entrepreneurship in Africa. He was a featured speaker at the Africa Infrastructure Conference, sponsored by the Corporate Council on Africa in April in Washington, and at President Obama's Forum with Young African Leaders in August.

"I am blessed to have this opportunity to bring solar ovens to my people. I'm helping alleviate poverty and global warming and make a profit at the same time," Mutebi said.

Energy from Oceans and Rivers to Power the U.S. Grid

Hydrokinetic energy entering world of renewables

By Karin Rives
Staff Writer

Washington — There was the sun and the wind — and now comes the power of water. If the promise of this fledgling energy technology holds true, it could eventually be as affordable and viable as fossil fuel and nuclear power.

In late 2010, Ocean Power Technologies (OPT) expects to become the first ocean wave-energy company to produce power for the U.S. electric grid. If things go as planned, the New Jersey-based corporation would also become the world's first to continuously produce wave-generated power for public consumption.

"We really believe we have an incredible source of energy, and a source that is much more concentrated

than, for example, wind energy,” said George Taylor, OPT’s founder and executive chairman. “We’re late out of the starting block, but we expect in three years to be a very important part of the renewables game.”

Entrepreneurs who are exploring how to best harness energy from waves, tides and currents in oceans and rivers — so-called hydrokinetic power — are starting small.

Hydro Green Power, which today claims the nation’s only federally licensed hydrokinetic site in the Mississippi River, began to sell power to the Minnesota grid in August 2009. The Texas-based company specializes in capturing river currents downstream from existing locks and dams where the water flows fast.

The company’s turbines near an existing hydroelectric dam owned by the Minnesota town of Hastings produces power for about 70 homes, based on average household use. Hydro Green Power plans a number of projects for the Midwestern and eastern United States that one day could serve thousands of customers.

OPT’s first commercial project in Hawaii, made in collaboration with the U.S. Navy, initially will produce enough power to serve about 40 homes when it comes online in a few months. Next, the company plans to open a wave-energy generating station off the coast of Oregon in 2012 that will power 1,500 homes.

OPT reached what’s known as a stakeholder agreement with citizen groups and state and federal agencies earlier this month, paving the way for an official permit to operate the wave-energy station. The company expects the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission, the agency that regulates U.S. power producers, to issue a full license for its first Oregon project within a year.

The U.S. government so far has issued about 140 preliminary permits (PDF, 3.1MB) for hydrokinetic projects around the country.

Traditional hydropower plants, which use dams to generate electricity, today account for about 10 percent of the nation’s power supply. With wave, current and tidal energy plants coming online in the years ahead, water power eventually could wean a significant number of American homes and businesses off fossil-generated power that contributes to climate change, officials say.

POWER SOURCE CLOSE TO HOMES

Unlike wind, which comes and goes, waves are constant and predictable, Taylor said. The floating buoys used to capture wave power have most of their equipment below the surface of the water where it cannot be seen. That

tends to make them less controversial than wind turbines that obscure views, he said.

Another advantage, he said, is that power from ocean waves is captured near coasts where about half the world’s population lives.

After the first large-scale project in Oregon goes online two years from now, OPT plans to get a second, bigger station up and running along the same coast in 2013. The company has received two grants worth a total of \$3.5 million from the U.S. Energy Department to develop its wave-power system.

Oregon, in the Pacific Northwest, is known for its green policies, and the state worked closely with OPT to get the first power proposal reviewed by involved entities in the area and to keep the project on track. The prospect of getting new jobs in the area was part of the attraction.

“The manufacture of the first buoy has already created dozens of green-energy jobs in Oregon, and when the 10-buoy wave power project is built, a whole new industry will be created to benefit our coastal communities,” Oregon Governor Ted Kulongoski said in a recent statement. “This is an exciting time for our state.”

Muslim Backpack Program Expands in United States and Abroad

Zakat Foundation works with local groups to help poor children succeed

By M. Scott Bortot
Staff Writer

Washington — A Chicago-area Muslim charitable organization is partnering with police departments and social welfare groups to ensure that needy children have what many others take for granted: school supplies.

It all started when Zakat Foundation Executive Director Khalil Demir decided to help his fellow citizens on Chicago’s South Side, regardless of their religion.

“When school starts and many kids don’t have a backpack, they feel terrible,” Demir said.

For the eighth consecutive year, the Illinois-based Zakat Foundation is distributing backpacks laden with notebooks, pens and pencils, rulers and calculators to children in poor neighborhoods.

Sheryl Bilal, the Zakat Foundation’s social services director, said the backpack program began in 2002 under the slogan “To Kids, from Kids, with Love.” Youth volunteers often supply and fill the backpacks.

“It is a privilege for Zakat Foundation to be able to

provide school supplies and backpacks to so many children," Bilal said. "Their excitement at having new things for school is evident in their smiling faces."

Most recently, the Zakat Foundation teamed up with the police department in Markham, Illinois, south of Chicago. Officers picked up about 150 supply-filled backpacks from Zakat for distribution in their community.

Terry Durkin, a civilian resource officer at the City of Markham Police Department, said she tapped into the Zakat Foundation's help when she started a backpack program in her city's public schools six years ago.

"When I see the kids every day who don't have pencils and crayons and book bags, that's when I decided to get a book bag program together," Durkin said.

This year's Zakat program aims to hand out 600 backpacks in the Chicago area.

In addition to the Markham Police Department, Zakat contributed backpacks to a program with the Juvenile Probation and Court Services Department of Cook County, which serves the Chicago area.

Other Muslim organizations in Chicago join Zakat in distributing backpacks. Backpack distributions are planned for the Light of Islam Mosque, Masjid Dawah and social services group Project Downtown: Chicago.

Michael Swies, lead organizer for Project Downtown: Chicago, said his group first partnered with Zakat in 2008 to distribute school supplies in some of Chicago's poorest neighborhoods. At Project Downtown: Chicago, volunteers hand out the backpacks to children and parents from Islamic learning center Masjid Dawah.

"A lot of [the parents] are having a hard time figuring about where they are putting their money," Swies said. "By them having school supplies provided, it makes it easier for them to put their money toward food and other basic needs."

Although the backpacks are distributed from a mosque, Swies said most families receiving them are not Muslim. Project Downtown: Chicago plans to distribute Zakat Foundation backpacks on the weekend of September 4.

Early success in the backpack program prompted Zakat to take it overseas in 2003.

"Each year we find a different country that we are going to donate to and we send the bags there," Bilal said. "We wait until we have quite a number of bags for our shipping container and then we send that along with other things like medical supplies and computers and

clothes."

Zakat's international and local backpack programs are identical except at the preparation phase.

For the local program, Zakat purchases backpacks and supplies and packs them before distribution. With the international program, Zakat has individual donors provide and fill backpacks so the donors and their children will feel a personal connection to the effort.

"We also encourage them if they want to have pen pals overseas, that they could put a little note in there," Bilal said. "They would fill the backpacks with whatever supplies they wanted to send to the children and then have them delivered to our offices."

This year, the Zakat Foundation is sending backpacks to children in Pakistan along with supplies associated with flood relief.

Zakat Foundation officials said the local and international backpack programs continue to expand as families around the world struggle to make ends meet.

For the U.S. and Iran, a Friendly Competition

Match at world championship is about basketball, not nationalism

By Jeff Baron
Staff Writer

Washington — When the U.S. and Iranian national teams play one another in basketball, Hamed Haddadi says, some boastful words will be exchanged — but that's only because the Iranian center and U.S. forward Rudy Gay are such good friends.

Never mind the tense relationship between their governments, which have been at odds for 31 years. What matters on the court at the FIBA World Championship in Istanbul, Turkey, is basketball, and the teasing between opposing players — called "trash talk" — is part of the game when friends play one another.

"For the past few months, as this game has been materializing and we got the matchups for the world cup, we were kind of jabbing at each other back and forth," said Haddadi, a member of the professional National Basketball Association (NBA) team the Memphis Grizzlies, where Gay is his teammate. "He kept on bothering me with comments like 'I'm going to dunk on you, Hamed,' or 'I'm going to score a bunch of points on you,' and I went back to him and said, 'Watch out, because you're going to get blocked a couple of times in that game.'"

Reached at his hotel in Istanbul on the eve of the

September 1 Iran-U.S. match, Haddadi noted the “talk and hype surrounding this game.” He said it will be a chance for Iran to play its best, though not necessarily to beat a U.S. team packed with NBA stars. Haddadi is the first Iranian to play in the NBA.

“From a basketball standpoint, it’s always good to play the best basketball team in the world and, in my opinion, the U.S. ranks among that hierarchy,” he said.

Trash talk is not a usual part of international basketball, Haddadi said, because it requires that opposing players be friends, or at least familiar with one another. That happens on American playgrounds and in the NBA, but not often in international tournaments, where one player might face an opponent only once in a career.

Although basketball, not politics, is on the players’ minds, Haddadi said national pride does have a role in international competition. In facing the U.S. team, though, he said the Iranian players can be proud even if they are defeated.

“We want to go out there and represent our country well,” he said. “We want to put on an honorable and respectable performance and not embarrass ourselves. You have to remember, every player on that U.S. team, for the most part, is a superstar on their own [professional] team, so this is a collection of stars, the best of the best there is.” His goal, and that of his teammates: “I will give my best effort to represent myself as a player, but also, more importantly, as a player for the country of Iran.”

Haddadi lamented that the Iranian team’s efforts get “very, very limited exposure” in Iranian media, and he didn’t think the U.S.-Iran game was being televised in Iran, “so that takes away a little bit from it, that our fans and our countrymen in Iran cannot watch this game.”

“I get e-mails. I get messages on my Facebook fan page from people who support us, thousands of people who want to see the game,” Haddadi said. “But I know that, for right now, the lack of media coverage definitely contributes to the fact that [basketball is] just not as big as it should be in Iran.” As a result, he said, Iran’s basketball program lacks the resources to win at the top international levels.

Haddadi, 25, who stands 218 centimeters (7 feet, 2 inches) tall, has spent two seasons in the NBA as a backup center for the Grizzlies, and he said he has become comfortable with his adopted home. He even sponsored a basketball camp for Iranian-American youngsters in Los Angeles last year, and he plans to repeat the camp this fall in at least two cities.

“The assimilation process was very smooth for me,” he

said. “I’m very comfortable with my teammates, the country, the U.S. I really love living there and working there. The great friends I’ve made on the team, my colleagues — Marc Gasol, Rudy Gay — those are guys that have become my friends as much as they’ve become my teammates. I feel that I have really established myself in the country.”

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